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ABSTRACT

A knowledge of literary forms, periods, and biographical background is of secondary importance in the study of literature, the primary function of which is to help students experience through feeling, intellect, and imagination what it is to be alive. This may be accomplished by the "inductive" or "discovery" method in which students are encouraged to examine the work under discussion and enter into the closest possible relationship with it. (MF)

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THE PRIMARY GOAL IN TEACHING LITERATURE

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I.

The aim of teaching literature is often misunderstood. Teachers of other subjects do not readily see what we are trying to do, and administrators frequently simply shake their heads in disbelief. Even we teachers of English, though we have an intuitive feeling for what motivates us, have a very difficult time in saying what the aim of teaching our subject is.

Let me be specific. Suppose any one of us were unexpectedly put on the spot, some day after we had taught Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Suppose someone asked us, "Why were you teaching this poem?" No doubt, we could advance plausible reasons. But I suggest that we look carefully at the ones which come to mind most readily.

Have we taught this poem because we wish our students to know what an ode is? No doubt, we do wish this. We want them to know that an ode is a dignified poem on an important and lofty subject. Most of us wish our students to recognize the poetic form in which this ode is written – in iambic pentameter terza rima, with interlocking rhymes *aba, bcb, cdc* . . .

. . . Autumn's being
. . . the leaves dead
. . . an enchanter fleeing
. . . hectic red
. . . O thou
. . . wintry bed

Certainly we are pleased to have the students recognize some formal characteristics of the poem. But isn't all this secondary? Isn't our primary goal in reading Shelley's ode something other than this?

Perhaps we will say next that we wish the students to see this poem as belonging to the Romantic Period in English literature. Furthermore, some of us would like them to know that this period began in 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and that it ended with the death of Sir Walter Scott in 1832; also, that it is recognized as a great age

of lyric poetry, and that it produced many memorable familiar essays. Certainly, we are pleased to have our students know a few facts of literary history. But is this really the primary reason that we have had them read Shelley's ode? Surely this knowledge is secondary to our real purpose.

And we hope, too, that the students will know something of the details of Shelley's life and character – this Ariel spirit among poets, "tameless and swift, and proud," who met such a moving, youthful death, finally himself given to the fierce wind and the sea. But this is not the primary aim in reading the poem; somehow it is secondary knowledge, when we are face to face with the ode.

Perhaps, then, we may say that our concern is the *poetic* characteristics of the poem: its tone, its magic imagery, its structure, its insistent theme. This is much closer to what we are after, because a concern with these matters and a recognition of the particular quality of them in Shelley's ode keeps our attention focused upon the poem itself. Yet even these concerns, I wish to suggest, are secondary reasons for our teaching the poem.

Is it not true that what we are seeking primarily is to bring our students into a more intimate relationship with the poem than simply to acquire knowledge of a body of facts more or less closely related to it? Are we not trying constantly to cause them to do more than learn facts? Are we not finally trying to evoke a condition in which the poem becomes a live thing that enters their consciousness, stirs their feelings and intellects, arouses their imagination? In short, we want the students to *experience* the work of literature, with such vividness that something of it will enter into their inner being and in some measure will never be forgotten. Isn't this really the primary aim in our teaching a work of literature, to cause our students to experience it deeply? I for one think so.

Literature is a record of what it has been like to be alive, quite possibly the most intimate, most sensitive, and thus most accurate and comprehensive record that mankind has made. Literature – poetry, drama, and fiction, that is – recreates the sensation of being alive. Consequently, experiencing a work of literature, and knowing that we are experiencing it, means that we are to some degree being sensitized to the potential of what it is like to be alive. If we read the "Ode to the West Wind" with this heightened awareness, we are not simply learning how Shelley despaired and exulted a century and a half ago, nor are we merely inspecting the techniques that a skilled rhetorician has used to obtain verbal effects. Even less are we concerned about what is called the

Romantic Period, or its thousands of related facts. We are engaged in something far more important; we are experiencing a sense of being alive. Or, more precisely, we are not only realizing one of the sensations of being alive, but we are also aware that we are reading about it and not actually living through the circumstance. In a way, we can both have our cake and eat it, too.

I suggest that it is this sort of experience that teachers of literature wish to have happen to their students. They wish their students to be made more aware of what the potentials are of being alive. This is the primary goal of teaching literature.

The following chart indicates this process graphically.

I.	PRIMARY GOAL Experiencing the literature	SECONDARY GOALS Apprehending characteristics of the literature Acquiring knowledge related to the literature
II.	OPERATION Class discussion, i.e., direct contact with a work of literature...leads to;..(1) Apprehension of some characteristic of literature and (2) Knowledge related to literature or intellectual history...contributes to...Increased ability to experience the next work of literature	
III.	FROM THE PRIMARY GOAL The student is sensitized to certain potentials of being alive	FROM THE SECONDARY GOALS The student is more informed in an area of culture

The primary goal of studying literature is distinct from the secondary goals, but it is closely related to them. The student experiences the literature by being brought face to face with it through classroom discussion. The discussion inevitably concerns itself with such secondary goals as the apprehension of some quality of the literature (such as its tone, mood, imagery, form, or theme), or perhaps with biographical information or the in-

tellectual history of the age in which the piece of literature was written. Such secondary information, say in the instance of Shelley's ode, will help the student to make a more immediate and firmer contact with the next poem of Shelley's that he reads, or even with the next Romantic poem that he reads, or (to a slighter degree) with the next poem that he studies. There is a constant interplay between the primary goal and the secondary goals, and in practice they constantly reinforce one another.

From the primary experience the student gains the most valuable thing that reading literature can give him: he is further sensitized to some potential of being alive. From the secondary experiences, he gains further knowledge about some area of human culture.

II.

It is characteristic of the indirection by which we work that almost all courses in literature are structured so as to fulfill one of the secondary goals. In one sort of course, the literature is studied according to a chronological pattern, with continual emphasis given to coordinate biographical information and intellectual history. This approach is used in most survey courses and in courses which deal with a single period of literature, such as the Romantic Age or the American Renaissance. A variation of this approach is a course concerned with only a limited number of major writers; such a course gains in intensity and depth, though it loses something in breadth of coverage.

Another widely adopted pattern is the literature course which is structured thematically. This pattern groups together a number of literary works which are concerned with a common broad subject matter, such as Heroism, Love, Death, the Search for Wisdom, the American Frontier.

A third pattern groups the literature according to literary types or genres — short stories, novels, essays, tragedies, epics, lyric poems, and so forth. The assumption here is that the students in such a program will learn something of the nature of each genre.

These are the principal patterns for literature courses. All of them suggest that the study of literature is aimed at acquiring a body of information. Examinations in the courses also seem to bear out this suggestion.

And yet – in spite of the structural framework of the course, and in spite of what examinations and other requirements seem to suggest – the primary concern, not only of the teacher but of the student too, is that the student respond in an immediate and meaningful way to the impact of the literary work under present consideration. This kind of response is recognized by both teacher and student as the true measure of success of the course. Everything else is secondary.

If this is true, it is of some importance to inquire into what circumstances in the English classroom have the best chance of bringing about such an immediate and compelling response to a literary work that the student may be said to *experience* that work. I wish to suggest that this occurs more often because of the method of teaching than for any other reason. The way of teaching that has been called the "inductive" method, or the "discovery" method, does successfully involve students in this way.

In the inductive method, the teacher brings the work of literature before the students – in the case of poetry, by reading the poem aloud as the students follow the written text – and then asks them questions which they can answer if they look at the poem with sufficient care and with sufficient perception. The teacher does not supply the answers to the questions, but continues to rephrase and reask them until the students find the answers in the work of literature itself. In this process, the students learn a certain body of information. And if the questions have been carefully framed, the students are learning important matters about the work of literature.

But something else is happening, soo. The whole teaching strategy is designed to bring the students into the closest possible relationship with the poem. They hear it read as they follow with their eyes; they search through it for answers to thoughtful questions; they consider its form, its meaning, its implicatons. Through this, it is almost impossible for them not to respond to the poem as a genuine experience.

There is all the difference in the world between such teaching and that which spells out in advance in an abstract form every concept that the students are expected to master. The over-directive teacher may begin the class hour with a statement such as:

Now we are going to study imagery in poetry. Please write this in your notebook.

"A poetic *image* is a picture that a poet uses, a visual detail or perhaps a detail that appeals to some other sense. Often a poet uses these details in a figurative or symbolic way.

"Some typical visual images are:
A.
B.
C.
"Some typical auditory images are:
A.
B.
C.
"Some typical tactile images are:
A.
B.
C.
[And so forth.]

Such a teacher, having spelled out in advance all the abstract concepts that the lesson will include, is likely to begin the actual lesson with a statement such as:

> Today we are going to look at the images in a sonnet written by Shakespeare. I want you to pick out the images and classify them as visual, auditory, tactile, etc.

So the poor students, instead of having the opportunity to experience the living force of Shakespeare's insight, will have to look upon the poem as an *example* of visual, auditory, and tactile images. Instead of being asked to discover anything for themselves, they are told that literature contains various kinds of images, and they are required to classify them as they appear in one sample of literature.

Such an arbitrary and abstract approach is likely to destroy every possibility that the students can experience the poem. The students may be able to parrot back some information about imagery, but they will totally miss the experience of Shakespeare's sonnet. And it is highly probable that the primary purpose in studying literature will be missed entirely.